

PROLOGUE

What is baseball? At first blush this appears to be a straightforward question. And in many ways it is. Baseball is a game. Nevertheless, the question persists: what is it, really? Football is a game, but it is not baseball. Neither are basketball and hockey. Putting aside the differences among balls, pucks, rules, and regulations, there seems to be something fundamentally different about baseball when compared with these other sports. All of them are games, but to many people, baseball is *baseball*. In a sense, it is something else altogether.

This sense perhaps comes from the notion that, aside from a game, it is also a concept. It is America's game—our national pastime—so therefore it bears significant emblematic weight. And it has historically borne this weight remarkably well. It has been used to inform us as to our national values and beliefs, to promote and reaffirm what it means to be an American, to define the essence of our country, practically from the time it first gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. Even in its shortcomings it has, in a way, defined us, represented us, and told us who we were. So, what is baseball? Symbolically and conceptually speaking, it is America. Through the game's historical narrative, larger themes emerge: ones focused on equality, patriotism, heroism, capitalism—the usual suspects within the American canon. And to be sure, all of those themes can be found in baseball, some of them in abundance. Therefore, in many ways, baseball's narrative is idyllic America's as well. Assuming we choose to see it that way.

Because we can also see it another way. Rather than see baseball through a patriotic, sepia haze, we can choose to see it through a more

critical eye, one that permits us to see our collective selves at something less than our best. Through the growth and development of baseball we can see the corrupting potential of influence—the petty power struggles as well as the consequential ones—that have likewise defined our nation for well over two centuries. Though baseball as a game is sharply defined, constrained by tangible boundaries such as foul lines and a strike zone, baseball as a concept is a far more malleable entity. It can be, and has been, many different things, depending on one's viewpoint. To say that baseball is America is simple enough—assuming that we understand what “America” means to the one drawing the parallel.

A People's History of Baseball is baseball history from an alternative viewpoint. Herein are stories focusing on the concept of baseball but ones that challenge convention and play out differently than the oft-told tales because of the shift in perspective. Regardless, they have much in common with the more well-known stories in that beyond their differing perspective, they are just that—stories. Rarely, however, is a story merely a story.

Simply put, stories are oftentimes how we construct our world. As scholars of storytelling have observed, “[w]e understand, we ‘know,’ by relying on a stock of conventional stories—stories about how the world runs, how people are likely to behave in it, how certain causes are likely to result in certain effects. These stories are our ordinary understanding of the world.”¹ These tales turn out to be useful in our comprehension of more general rules and principles. In short, we become indoctrinated to universal concepts of how our society “should” work through the stories we tell and eventually internalize. It is through this process that the concept of baseball (that is, the notion that our national game is somehow representative of basic American ideals and mores) flourishes. In this way, and to take as an example one of the stories discussed herein, how we understand the story of Branch Rickey, Jackie Robinson, and the breaking of baseball's color line shapes our perception of more universal principles, such as what it means to be an American. Because of the nexus between baseball and America, these baseball stories often serve as the symbolic examples that enlighten us on our beliefs regarding how our country operates and what it stands for.

Of course, not all stories are equally effective. To achieve significant symbolic status, a story must connect with its intended audience; it must

speaking to their values in order to produce the necessary resonance.² To do this, it must first be coherent: it needs to hang together such that all of the necessary elements fit neatly as if parts of a puzzle.³ Next, it must ring true with the listener's own sense of how the story *should* play out. Interestingly, one thing it does not have to be is accurate or truthful in any way. In fact, fictional stories are oftentimes the most persuasive stories precisely because their freedom from the constraints of truth allows them to hang together so well and so neatly match their audience's expectations. As Aristotle recognized in his *Rhetoric* more than two thousand years ago, logical arguments or stories persuade not because there is something inherently true about logic but simply because people value and respond to logic irrespective of the truth underlying it.⁴ "True" stories suffer in comparison because of the inherent contradictions and missing pieces present in messy, everyday life.⁵ Consequently, not only is the veracity of a particular story an inaccurate measure of its persuasiveness, if anything, the opposite may be the case: the asymmetry of reality can prove to be a significant barrier to the resonance required for a story to achieve its goal. In this sense, the more resonant the story, the more suspect it becomes. Because patriotic, culturally affirming baseball stories have traditionally resonated very deeply within American society, they deserve their moment under the microscope. Discovering what lies behind their creation might prove illuminating.

Irrespective of the truth, as consumers of these stories, we tend to consider those stories that conform to how we view our world, or our country, as the truth anyway.⁶ In fact, they do not even feel like stories to us. Because they resonate so deeply, we tend to believe that they also inform us as to the bigger picture—our country, our world, our beliefs.⁷ In this way, popular, comforting, cheerful stories are oftentimes the most powerful stories of all.⁸ By contrast, "counter-stories"—ones that challenge accepted, conventional beliefs—are often dismissed as (take your pick) manipulative, political, anecdotal, unprincipled, and/or unfair.⁹ To a large degree, these criticisms are accurate; counter-stories are typically all of these things and more. But so are the others. In the end, all stories, whether they confirm our beliefs or challenge them, are manipulative, political, anecdotal, and, to the extent they are used to illustrate larger, universal truths, unfair. For in the end, all stories are just that—stories.

A People's History of Baseball is not about the baseball stories we already know but the ones we are much less familiar with—the counter-stories. At first glance, the stories challenged and retold herein may not even strike us as stories at all—the founding of the National League, baseball's relationships with the rule of law and the media, the integration of the game, midcentury expansion, and the rise and public rebuke of the Players Association. Rather, they feel like objective, historical narratives. As we now know, however, this makes them immediately suspect—not false per se but subject to closer analysis. The point of telling these counter-stories is not in the expectation that they will replace the conventional stories (indeed, this is far too much to ask—it is extremely difficult if not impossible for a counter-story to change the conventional story merely by highlighting its inherent weaknesses)¹⁰ but rather, in the hope that they will help us achieve a better understanding of the stories we, as a culture, have internalized; to help us recognize that they are simply stories and not objective analyses of the facts that underlie them. Through these counter-stories we can reassess the stories of baseball as America and perhaps understand them, as well as what they represent, more thoroughly.

By challenging the perspective of these deeply entrenched stories of baseball and offering alternative ways of approaching them, the counter-stories in this book also reveal something else: that the conventional “concept of baseball” stories are not so much stories of equality, patriotism, heroism, and capitalism as they are stories of power—how it is obtained, how it perpetuates itself, and how those who have it use the weapon of storytelling (through, in this instance, the notion of baseball as America) to convince their audience that they are not wielding it when in fact they are, and in significant measure. In the end, however, it is important to remember that as counter-stories, they are inherently manipulative, political, and unfair. In other words, they are no different than the stories we already know.

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A PEOPLE’S HISTORY OF BASEBALL

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